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Toronto

Ontario relaxes long-term care visiting rules, as province reports fewest COVID-19 cases since March

Province reporting the fewest people in Ontario hospitals with confirmed cases since early April

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Mandatory mask bylaws continue to spread through municipalities in Ontario. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)



Ontario is relaxing visitation rules for long-term care facilities, as the province reports 102 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday — the fewest on any single day since March 25.

Effective immediately, up to two people at a time can visit a loved one outdoors, said Minister of Long-Term Care Merrilee Fullerton Wednesday. Visitors outside no longer need to show they've taken a COVID-19 test in the previous two weeks.

Indoor visits, which are currently limited to essential workers and families of palliative patients, will be permitted as of July 22, with a two-person limit.

In those instances, however, visitors will still need to "verbally attest" they've had a negative result on a COVID-19 test taken within the previous two weeks.

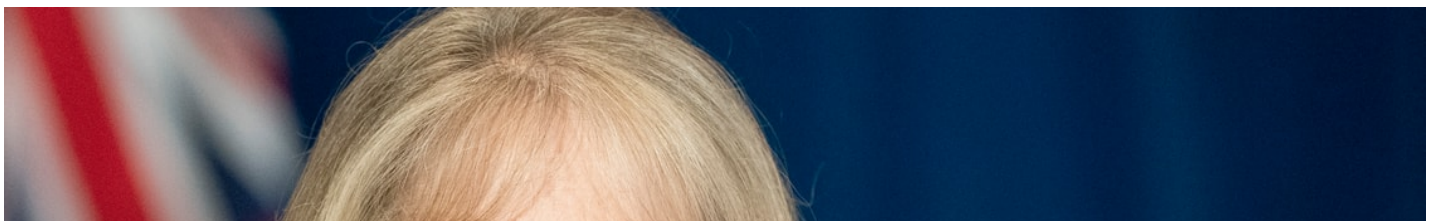
In order to accept visitors, a long-term care home must not currently have a COVID-19 outbreak. Visitors must wear their own face coverings for outdoor visits. People must wear surgical or "procedure" masks for indoor visits, which homes are expected to supply. Visitors must also pass a screening questionnaire.

"This is a process that we will be vigilant with and we'll be monitoring," said Fullerton.

The province also said it would provide funding for air conditioning in long-term care homes, although Fullerton would not say exactly how much money the government is committing. Officials say Ontario will make air conditioning mandatory in any new or renovated long-term care homes.

Premier Doug Ford committed to changing legislation to mandate air conditioning last week — a day after [CBC News asked him about families who were concerned about their loved ones living in sweltering conditions](#).

WATCH / Minister of long-term care announces changes to visiting policies





Ontario to expand long-term care home visits

12 months ago | 0:44

Indoor visits will be allowed by July 22, says Merrilee Fullerton, the minister of long-term care. 0:44

Primary caregivers will also be allowed to see residents inside. CBC News has heard from various families with loved ones in long-term care who have been deeply worried about limitations on primary caregivers, and the effects on residents. [Some physicians have also vocally supported allowing essential caregivers to return to facilities.](#)

[Details of the impending changes to long-term care were first reported by the Toronto Sun Wednesday morning.](#)

Funding model changing for building long-term care beds

Ontario is also changing the way it funds long-term care beds in a bid to spur a much-needed expansion.

Ontario's long-term care homes have been especially hard hit by COVID-19, with more than 1,800 residents having died of the illness since the pandemic began. The ministry says it is tracking ongoing outbreaks in 38 facilities.

The government said a new formula will pay builders more, and include grants to cover up to 17 per cent of up-front capital costs.

The Progressive Conservatives said the creation of thousands of needed beds has been slow because the previous system was outdated, so the changes are intended to spark building

within the sector. But the additional costs will also limit how far a previously promised \$1.75 billion in funding will stretch, with Ford scaling back the number of beds the money can build.

Ford re-announced that \$1.75 billion on Wednesday, saying the money is now expected to pay for 8,000 new beds and 12,000 renovated beds. Last fall, the government said that money would create 15,000 new long-term care beds and upgrade 15,000 more.

On Wednesday, Ford said they would develop 30,000 beds developed over the next 10 years, with a plan coming in the coming weeks. Today's announcement is the "first step in a number of new initiatives" to meet their target, said Ford.

"We need to tear down and redevelop old homes and we need to build new ones," Ford said. "We need thousands of new long-term care beds, and we need them fast."

Funding changes criticized by union, opposition

In a news release, SEIU Healthcare, the union that represents over 60,000 frontline healthcare workers in Ontario, said the province's announcement does nothing to deliver better care for residents, leaving the long-term care sector unprepared for the possibility of a second wave of the pandemic in the fall.

"Expanding an already strained system does nothing to improve quality care," said SEIU President Sharleen Stweart, in the statement.

"We don't have enough frontline workers today to deliver dignified care for vulnerable seniors. What the provincial government announced will do nothing to guarantee that we'll have enough workers to provide quality care today, let alone in the future."

Opposition leaders also criticized the announcement, with NDP Leader Andrea Horwath saying the funding formula change is another empty promise even as the serious long-term care bed shortage drags on.

Liberal Leader Stephen Del Duca said the announcement does nothing to address immediate concerns during the pandemic.

"Flu season and a potential second wave of COVID-19 are on the horizon, but Doug Ford has no plan to fix the ongoing crisis in long term care by fixing the staffing shortage," he said in a statement.

The CEO of the Ontario Long Term Care Association, meanwhile, praised the changes.

"The government's increased level of capital funding will help a number of operators who were not able to previously secure financing to rebuild their homes," Donna Duncan said in a statement.

"We are committed to working with the government to expedite the capital projects that are made feasible through this modernized program."

Almost 89% of cases now considered resolved

The 0.3 per cent increase in overall cases brings the total in Ontario since the outbreak began to 37,052. Of those, 88.8 per cent are considered resolved by the Ministry of Health. Another 135 were marked resolved today.

Thirty-one of the province's 34 public health units reported five or fewer newly confirmed infections of the novel coronavirus, while 19 of those 31 confirmed no new cases at all.

There are now about 1,400 active cases of COVID-19 provincewide.

Ontario's network of labs processed 23,769 tests for the novel coronavirus in the last 24 hours. Another 22,029 are in the queue waiting to be completed.

The number of patients in Ontario hospitals with confirmed cases of COVID-19 sits at 115, the fewest since the province began reporting that figure in early April. Thirty-one of those people are being treated in intensive care, while 22 are on ventilators.

The province's official COVID-19 death toll grew by nine and is now 2,732. A CBC News count based on data directly from public health units puts the real current toll at 2,762.

- [**As Ontario heads to Stage 3, pressure grows for full-time school plan amid COVID-19**](#)

- [COVID-19 situation in the U.S. 'scary' and 'dangerous,' Canadian long-haul truckers warn](#)

Child-care operators call for full reopening

A group of Ontario child-care operators is also asking the province to allow the sector to fully reopen in September.

The six operators, who are all women, say a government plan that restricts capacity could result in the closure of some centres.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce said this week that the province was planning to expand the number of children allowed in daycare centres effective July 27, from the current cohorts of 10 to 15 children.

Lecce said that should help restore 90 per cent of the province's pre-pandemic child-care system capacity.

The providers call the cohort numbers "arbitrary" and say they will reduce available child-care spaces for families.

The group says full capacity can be accommodated safely if they adhere to strict physical distancing and the [recommendations for school reopenings made by Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children](#).

Corrections

- A previous version of this story stated that indoor visits to long-term care homes will not require COVID-19 testing. In fact, for indoor visits, visitors need to verbally attest they have tested negative within the previous two weeks.

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With files from Lucas Powers and The Canadian Press

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